

STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

OH 694

Full transcript of an interview with

IAN ABDULLA

on 09 June 2004

by June Edwards

Recording available on CD

Access for research: Unrestricted

Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the
State Library

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was created by the J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (ie. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square bracket [] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This is usually words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These are not necessarily differentiated from insertions the interviewer or by Somerville Collection staff which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee as well as minor deletions of words or phrases are often not indicated in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee is usually placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original tape recording of this interview are cautioned to check this transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or the interviewee but which will not occur on the tape. (See the Punctuation section above.) Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the tape recorded version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

Interview with Ian Abdulla recorded by June Edwards on the 9th June 2004 for The State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is June Edwards interviewing Ian Abdulla on the 9th June 2004 at the State Library. So, Ian, where were you born?

I was born at Swan Reach on a riverbank under a tree at Swan Reach, and I was a sick boy so I went to Mannum Hospital, and I was there for about five years, I think.

And what was the problem?

I don't know, I don't know what the problem was.

Did your mother have medical care when she had you, seeing you were born under a tree, did she have any help?

I don't know. I think she had my auntie there as a midwife there helping her, under the tree, she would have had her sister helping her with me and my other brother, because I'm a twin. And I came out first and my other brother came second. And he was at home, but I was sent to Mannum.

And who did you live with in Mannum?

I stayed in the hospital for a while, and then I was living with some people in the town, in Mannum, till they come and got me.

So did your father come and get you or your mother come and get you?

I think they both come and got me. And when I went home my mother was cooking damper and I was brought up to talk like a white person and I said to her, 'Mum, can I have some cake, please?' (laughs) And all the other kids started laughing, brothers and sisters started laughing.

So where did your mother and father come from, like what was their background?

Well, my father was from Eucla up in the North, and his father come from over Afghanistan, he was one of the cameleers that used to come across from Perth to South Australia with the camels. And my mother's from Point McLeay – Raukkan,

they call it – and she lived on the mission there for a while, then she moved to Swan Reach.

So she was an Aboriginal woman?

Yes, she was an Aboriginal woman and she was named Hunter – Ike Hunter's daughter.

So what was your family like? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Well, so far we had – like I think it was seven boys and five girls. Altogether. So, although we've got a couple of twins buried out at Gerard in the Riverland, and another one – I think three, three missing, I think.

So was it a noisy household?

Oh, yes, when we got going! (laughs) I used to go and play by myself, play cars around the side of the house, because once they started going off you can't hear yourself talking.

So you lived in the Riverland, mainly, when you were young?

Yes, when I was young I lived at Swan Reach till the 1956 flood come up, and we moved from there to the Riverland to Gerard, and from there we moved back to Winkie. Then we moved to Cobdogla and back to Gerard again.

And so was your father working during this time, like did he – – –?

In Swan Reach he was driving trucks for the Council, and up the Riverland he was grape picking and doing six months of harvesting grapes and stuff – grapes and apricots and nectarines and peaches. And then, when we were down at Cobdogla, he used to go out and set traps to sell once a week or once a fortnight. And he also went shearing when we were at Swan Reach – I mean, at Cobdogla. He used to go out shearing.

So what were your first memories of the River Murray?

When I was a boy? Can't remember. It would have been how wide it was and how big the punt was, going across, because we used to cross the punt to go to school. I started there when I was five, I think, used to go to Swan Reach School. And we'd cross over on the punt and then sometimes the boat would come in from Murray Bridge, the *Murray Princess*, and it would go to up the Riverland and it would pull in

at Swan Reach and the people used to chuck threepence and sixpences out and halfpennies, and we'd dive in and get them – get them before they fell in the cracks to go in the water. We made sure and got them, then we went to the shop and bought some striped candy and candy lollies and liquorice, we used to buy them.

And do you remember the flood in 1956?

No, I don't remember *that* much, because I was a bit too young, I think. I think when the flood did come, we moved before it got too big, we moved up to the Riverland. I know it was pretty floody up near the Riverland, in Winkie, there was water all over the place, places were washed out.

So what was your early life like, living on the Murray? Did you live in a house or on the banks of the Murray, or – – –? And what did you do as a child?

We lived in a house on sort of a reserve there in Swan Reach, and we used to go fishing along the Murray or fishing along the creeks, when flood was up. Or we'd go into the paddocks and like away forage and find little wild potatoes in the paddocks, where the old school used to be, and things like that.

And what was the Swan Reach Mission like?

It was all right from what I can remember. There was about eight – might be eight houses on there, I think, on the reserve. And we had our clothes line outside, our toilets outside. And when I was younger I used to play cars and marbles around the side of the house, and when the flood come up, before we left, I buried them and then these archaeologists, whatever call them, come up and dug them up again. They had lasted all through the flood. And they brought them up to the Riverland, and I remembered them straight away.

That was good, wasn't it. So what happened to them?

They've still got them. Yes.

So why did your family move from Swan Reach to Winkie?

Because of the flood.

Oh, right.

Because the water was coming over on the other side of the house and across the River was flooding over, and it washed the mission out, the reserve out, and all our

bank books and school books and everything got washed out, so we had to start from scratch, I think, when we got up to the Riverland.

So you went from Winkie to Cobdogla, and then to the Gerard Aboriginal community.

Yes. That's where I worked for ten years out there, driving tractors, trucks, bulldozers, putting in tomatoes, sticking tomatoes, putting in orange trees, putting in grape vines and things like that.

So how long did you stay at home, like how old were you when you left home?

I was at school, at college at Cobdogla, till I was fourteen, and I left school from Cobdogla and we moved out to Gerard and I started working at Gerard between fourteen and fifteen. And I started on my own at the age of fifteen I think I kept on my own, and I'm on my own ever since.

So that's when you started working with machinery in the orchards?

Yes.

Okay. So how did you end up at Barmera in the end?

Well, I had a house at Glossop, I had a house at Loxton River first, and then I got transferred from there over to Glossop. And then one of my sons got sick there and he died in Barmera, so they transferred me out of there to Barmera, and I've been there ever since. With me and my three kids, I brought them up for ten years on my own, put them to school.

So how did your son die?

He died with a disease called shigella, like something wrong with his stomach. Was in his bowel, I think. I'm not sure.

So how did you feel about bringing up your own children?

I felt good about it. It give me a chance to watch them growing up, and also when I started screen printing up there, in Glossop.

So what do you think the River Murray meant to your family?

It meant a lot to the family because we used to fish, fish from the river, camp on the river and hunt along the river, get all sorts – get wood from the river. It meant a lot, and I just can't remember much of it.

So do you think it sort of helped you survive as a family, because you were on the river?

Oh, yes, it helped us survive, taking fish and that. Then it helped me as I got older when I was living with the children's Mum – we camped near Cobdogla and I had to survive along the river catching fish myself. Because in the old days we used to catch swan eggs and bony bream in the river and in the swamps at Swan Reach we used to go and get them.

So has the river changed much since then?

It's changed a lot. You can't go and do what you could do then, like before, but you can't do anything now because there's too many restrictions on the river. You've got to be careful of how many lines you put in the river. And when you camp you've got to pay rates and pay so much a night to camp along the river, where in the old days we used to camp anywhere we wanted – pull up on the river and just put out a cross line and camp where we wanted to camp.

And did you ever sell the fish that you caught?

Yes, at Cobdogla we used to sell the fish to – we had cross lines in the river at Cobdogla, we used to set them every night and then go and run them every morning, then tether the fish on the willow tree for two or three days until we got enough and then we'd ring up to a bloke from Renmark and he'd come down and buy it, like on a Friday, Friday afternoon.

So did that earn you a reasonable living, or – – –?

Oh, it must have earned enough for us to buy food and that.

So was there anything else you sold or made, or whatever, from the river?

Only thing we used to do was get the rat skins from the swamp.

So what are these, water rats?

Yes, native water rats. We used to go into the swamps or the backwater in the creeks and dive down for mussels in winter, and we've have a fire on the bank, couple of blokes keep the fire going, and we'd all take turns going in the water getting the mussels – go down, come up, chuck them on the bank and somebody would be putting them in the bag, then it would be his turn, he'd go in and someone else would

go in until we get enough, and the old man and the brother used to go and set the traps on logs with the mussels in them to catch the rats. You'd get about ten, twelve, nearly twenty a night, skin them out and – skin them and then peg them out on a board in the sun to dry, then they'd sell them about (pause) Friday, I think, they'd go and sell them, to a bloke from Renmark. And I think they used to make purses and handbags out of them, out of the skins.

Are there still many water rats left in the river?

There are, but they're protected now. There's plenty. They know they can run free, they show themselves knowing you can't touch them! (laughs)

I guess the swan eggs would be the same.

Yes, the swan eggs – swans are protected. They'll come right up to you now.

So what made you do your screen printing course in 1988?

Well, I was doing the housework and working home, and then my sister said to me, 'Would you like to do some screen printing? You've got nothing to do all day.' So I said, 'All right, I'll give it a go,' and she said, 'There's a course going for thirteen weeks.' So I joined up and then went to the thirty-weeks course and done some screen printing. I'd done a set of six and a bloke's come up from Adelaide from Tandanya in Adelaide and bought the set for his private collection.

And had you ever done any art, any sort of art, before?

No, I haven't done any art myself. I've done a bit of drawing for one little white girl in South Terrace in Adelaide – it was her birthday and she didn't have any birthday presents, so I done a painting with charcoal, and she said it was the best present she had. That's the only time I done any drawing.

And Steven Fox was your teacher?

Yes, Steven Fox was the teacher.

And was he a good teacher?

Yes, when he was teaching I always felt a bit embarrassed a bit by doing a story on it, because I never went to school that long. And I said to Steve, 'Would it be all right if I put a story up the top?' He said, 'Yeah, that'll be a good thing, do whatever you want to do.' So I put a story on there, and I used to tell myself I would write the story

so if people would look at it, they'd say, 'Spelt something wrong.' (laughs) And then after that it bloomed from there and went on.

So who helped you get established, then, as an artist? Was it Steven Fox, or ---?

To get me going doing the art work it was John Keane from Tandanya, and it was about '80, I think – was it '89 or '88?

Oh, I had '88 you did the course.

I did the course, yes, and then about not long after that I started painting, little small ones, twelve-by-ten, for Tandanya, done an exhibition for them and sold about seventeen to a museum in Canberra. And then I done another one, and about fifteen to the museum in Adelaide. And then I won the Aboriginal Artist of the Year in – I can't [remember], '98 I think, or '99, can't remember. This is after I started painting, and I started coming up real quick.

And how long did you stay with Tandanya? For a while, or ---?

Only till as long as John Keane stayed there. And before he left he introduced me to a bloke by the name of Paul Greenaway at 39 Rundle Street, Kent Town, and I've been with him for eleven – nearly fourteen years been with him. It's a long time.

And I read that the size of your paintings is determined by what you could carry on the bus. Is that true?

Yes, they were, because they weren't allowed to carry them too big, otherwise they wouldn't be able to fit them onto the bus. They were small ones when I first started – I couldn't do them very big because there wasn't much room, the bus driver wouldn't put them on if there wasn't enough room.

So how do you get on with Paul Greenaway?

Yes, I get on all right with him. We have our ups and downs as usual, everybody has them, don't they? We get on all right.

And so does he organise your exhibitions for you and things like that?

Yes, he organises exhibitions and my canvases to come up and come back, and all my paints and my brushes to send up to me. All I have to do is ring him up and he'll send them up and send the canvases up. Then when I've finished I tell him I'm

finished and then he orders a truck and the truck will come the next morning and bring them back down, and he'll order some more to go up again.

And do you talk to him about your work, or ---?

Oh, we've been – lately we've – because I've been running out of stories, and he's been telling me – we have discussions on the 'phone, he's been telling me, 'Do you remember this? Do you remember that? Have you been doing this? Have you been doing that?' I say, 'Yeah, I've been doing this, I remember doing that.' So he writes the story down for me, then he sends them up to me and then I put the stories into a picture. As long as I'm in the story and it was me that was doing the stuff, I can put it straight on canvas. If anyone tell me what to do, well, I just can't because I won't know how to do it. I'd have to *be* there.

So what do you think you're trying to say with your art? Is there some sort of theme or ---?

Yes, I'm trying to tell my kids, just to tell my kids all about it. And my daughter said to my two boys: 'If we were to live like Dad lived years ago,' she said, 'we'd be starving.' (laughs) 'We wouldn't know what to do.' And the boys shut up and had nothing to say.

So you're just trying to tell your children your story.

And other people, like grown-ups, white people as well as Aboriginals. They've been remembering what they used to do in the early days like when I was growing up, they were doing same thing. As soon as they see a painting they say, 'I remember that. My Mum and Dad used to take me there,' or 'We used to go and do this,' sort of thing.

So do you see yourself as an Aboriginal artist?

Yeah, I reckon so. Growing up along the river I would *have* to be an Aboriginal artist.

And where do you think the story approach came from, like writing your stories on your artworks?

Well, that started from when I was doing screen prints. I asked Steve Fox when I do my painting, when I do screen printing, if I can put a story on top, and he said, 'Yeah, go and see how it goes.' So I put a story on the top and it went – it helped people to

know what the painting's about, or the screen print. And people come and ask me what it's all about, I tell them, 'Just look at the story' (laughs) 'and you'll know what it's all about. That's why the story's up there!' (laughs)

And what style would you call your art? Would you give it a style?

Sort of naïve and – I don't know, sort of naïve, I reckon.

Okay. So were there any artists that influenced you, or is it all just Ian?

No, no, no-one influenced me, I just done it myself. I had to teach myself how to paint and how to match colours and everything, I just kept remembering about the river and the trees and the scenery around me that make me put the colours in. I never go down there to have a look, as most of the paintings I do at night and they just come to me by memory.

That's interesting. So what do you think when people say that you're one of the best Australian artists in the country?

I just say, 'Yeah, whatever you say.'

(laughs) You don't believe them, or you do believe them?

I don't – it doesn't bother me much.

So where have you had exhibitions?

I've had exhibitions in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, British Columbia, over in Madrid and South Australia, Melbourne, Western Australia, Alice Springs – all over the place, I just can't keep up with them. In the Riverland there, I just had a show up there, just to show them what I was doing, and it was only up for one day and it came down – I sent it back on the bus to Paul, and he had them down here. I had an exhibition in his gallery, in Paul Greenaway's, in Adelaide – I can't remember the rest.

And do you sell all your work?

Yes, well, the last two or three were sell-outs, like in Melbourne and in Adelaide, in Paul Greenaway's, they were sell-outs.

So you'd be working pretty constantly to meet the demand?

Yes, I generally work every night of the week if I can, all depends what sort of mood I'm in. I've got to get in the right mood to get going, because if I'm not in the mood

it's not worth me trying because I wouldn't be able to do it right. Be a waste of time if I done one, because people – you have to think what the audience like and what the fans like outside, apart from yourself, what they go for. And also about what Paul thinks about it at the same time – he's the main man, to do them and think that he would be up to his satisfactory or things like that, whether they'd be any good.

So do you like going to your exhibitions?

Yes, trouble is you've got – I like going to the exhibitions, but you've got people coming up, wanting to talk to you and talk to you, and I get a dry mouth sometimes, like I'm doing now, and I can't keep up (sound of opening soft drink) to them.

Well, I might stop this side.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

Okay, Ian. We were talking about exhibitions, so did you enjoy the 'Riverland In Memory' exhibition at the Flinders University Gallery in 2002?

Yes, I enjoyed that one, it was a good one. I can't remember it much because there was too many exhibitions I done after that.

But it seemed to be a retrospective of your work, so it was a wonderful example of the work that you'd been doing.

It would have been an example of works to come, I reckon.

So do you think your works have changed over time?

Oh, in a lot of ways they've changed because when I first started I didn't know how to draw a horse, dog or little things, you know, and as I got older I sort of had to teach myself, I've picked it up, and now it's changed a lot since I first tried it, it's looking real good.

That's good. And what awards, what are the main awards you've been given, and were you pleased to sort of receive them?

Yes, I got an award for Aboriginal Artist of the Year in Adelaide here, and that was a good one. And then I got an award over in Canberra, come second, then I came level second in Canberra. Then I got another award from Darwin, and then an award from Barmera where I live for – I can't remember what it is now. And then I got an award for my book, Book of the Year, I got an award for that. And I can't remember the rest.

And does it make you happy when you get them?

Yes, it makes everybody – it makes me happy and it makes everyone happy that comes home, they've got to all look around the wall and they see all these awards. (laughs) And they say to me, 'Are you proud of them?' I say, 'Whatever.' (laughs)

And what do your family think of you becoming this famous artist?

Oh, some of them think it's all right. And some of them get a bit annoyed – not annoyed, but (pause) I can't think of it now, think of the word. But most of them like it, become an artist.

That's good. So what made you produce your children's books, *As I grew up* and *Tucker*? What made you decide to do them?

I decided to do that for my kids so they could have something to look back on, and I dedicated it to them at the same time, the book, *As I grew older*. Then they asked me if I could do another one about tucker, so I done the other one.

And have they sold well?

Yes. The first one was a sell-out, I don't know about the second one. They had to send overseas for more.

And what made you – how did you become involved when they did the play called *The Riverland*, that was on at the last Festival in?

Yes, well, I was involved, they send me ten canvases up and I had to do ten canvases about the river and things along the river, and where the flooding and drought and things like that, and then show people what it was like and what it's going to be like. And [I] sent them down to Paul and he put them up at the – what did they call it? It was a play –

Oh, at the Arts Theatre.

– the Art Studio in the Festival Theatre. So when people walk in they see the paintings first and then they look at the play, some of them go back after. They had kids and all going in there from schools.

And did you see the play?

I went and seen the play when they first done it for the children to come in and their parents, and the people from the play there what's doing the play, some of them had

parents over here and some of them come – brothers and sisters. Then I went and seen it twice afterwards, so I've seen it about three times. It was good. I've had feedback from it from where I live in Barmera. I went to Berri[?] shopping and people were telling me about it up there. They went and seen it on the last day and they said it was really good.

Good. So what do you think about the Murray River today?

I think it's really – you can't go much anywhere on the river today, because too many laws and they've decided the water is getting too dirty, and you've got to watch out how many fishing lines you chuck in, stuff like that.

And do you think the river's had a big influence on your life?

It has a big influence, big impact on my life, because it showed me what I can do when I got older to survive along the river, and things like that.

In what sort of way – just sort of living off it, or just as an inspiration?

Just living off the banks, like going catching fish and go in the swamps and walk in the water up over your waist, walk out for swan eggs, but you've got to watch out in case there's a snake in there, then you get the swan eggs if there's any and put them in the water and see if they float. If they float they put them back, and if they go down in the water you keep them because they're the good ones. And the parents of the eggs are not very far away, the swans. They're watching you do this at the same time. And you're in mud about knee-high in the swamp trying to go through to get these swan eggs.

Do the swans ever chase you?

No, no, swans never chase. They're frightened.

All right, then. I thought, if you didn't mind, we might just talk about some of your artworks as well. Is that all right?

In the book?

Yes. (sound of turning pages) So we're talking about, from *Elvis has entered the building* – why is it titled that?

(laughs) Well, when I used to go down to Paul Greenaway I used to walk in and say – I think it was when I walked in or when the paintings landed there, he'd say, 'Elvis

has entered the building,' and when the paintings leave from home I say, 'Elvis has left the building.' (laughs) they're going on the truck, heading towards Adelaide.

That's nice. So the first one was 'Prince and frog' about catching frogs for the cross lines.

Yes, we used to cross over from Gerard and the other side of the river by boat, and then get a torch and peel the bark back off the tree, and you see frogs we'd get the frogs and put them in tins and keep them and put them on the cross lines after that, and hope you'd go back next morning and catch some fish.

So are there many frogs left on the river now?

Yes, there should be a lot more in the river, same place or wherever they got gum trees along the river.

And what did you catch with the frogs?

Oh, we used to get Murray cod – they used to call them *pondi* – scallops was *plaki*, and catfish. Sometimes we'd catch a shag or whatever on there, beside the fish, or a turtle, on the line.

And did you used to catch big Murray cods?

Yes, the big ones. The big ones we used to catch were bigger than me when I was a boy, about over thirty-pounder.

Did they taste all right?

Yes, the medium ones were all right, but the big ones – they all tasted all right to me, but the big ones were a bit fatty, you know, they had too much fat on them. But to me they tasted all right.

Okay. The next one was the 'Sheep head trilogy'. (laughter) So did you use to eat sheep heads, or what did you do with sheep heads?

Yes, I used to walk down to the killing shed down at Winkie, Lower Winkie Road, and buy the sheep heads for threepence, sixpence or a shilling a head or two heads. And we used to take them home and then skin the sheep head with a razor blade – and it wouldn't have any brains, they'd take it out – and then we used to boil them or put them in the oven, and then people – the kids would want the eyes because it used

to be a good part, and then we used to use the bones after for – the jawbones for playing cowboys and Indians. I used to be one of the cowboys.

Were the jawbones the guns, or something?

Yes, jawbones, we used them as guns.

Okay. (turns pages) What's the next one? Oh, the next one was 'Rodeo at night' – did you just go and watch rodeos, or – – –?

My uncle, when we used to live at Winkie we were all living together, and he used to go – we used to all go into Berri and my uncle used to dress up in his cowboy outfit and we'd go into the rodeo. And he'd get on the horse and have a bit of a buckjump, and sometimes get on a bull, go around, because the ring was very short, like a boxing ring – bigger than a boxing ring – then, in them days, and they used to get on a horse and go around there for about a few seconds. That one's in memory of him, the uncle.

Okay. (turns pages) Oh, the next one is the River Murray and it's called 'Beating the hard times'.

That one there?

Yes. So it looks like it's – I think you're talking about how the River Murray helped you get through.

Yes, that's setting traps down in the swamps down at Cobdogla, for the rats. And it was one of the ways of making money in hard times, because work was hard to get apart from picking grapes. When it was off grape season we used to go out and get mussels and then father and one of the brothers would set the traps.

Okay. (turns pages) And that one's 'The evil spirits left my body'. What happened there? Did you have an experience?

Yes, one day I was going past the Gerard oval and I seen all these lights up round the oval and tents up. So I decided to go and have a look, and then when I got there one bloke there was praying for this young lad there, and the evil spirits were coming out of him and he was sort of barking like a dog – and like a real dog. And then I was watching him for a while and I said to the minister, 'Can you do that to me?' And he done it to me and my throat swelled up real big and all of a sudden gave a big gasp for breath and the evil spirits flew out. Yes.

Goodness!

Yes.

So did it make you feel better?

Made me feel light as a feather, like I never had a care in the world. I had a flagon there with me and a few smokes, I went and gave them away. But only trouble is, when the spirits come back in you come back in numbers, more than what come out of you.

So did you keep them away?

Tried to. (laughs)

Okay. Oh, this one was playing football for Gerard Mission when your uncle came out with no clothes on.

Yes.

I just think it's so funny, but it's so sad. (laughs)

Yes. Well, my uncle was down sitting near the boundary, and he come up from the trees near the river, and when the umpire was just about to bounce the ball for the first quarter. And he bounced the ball all right, and when we looked around we seen one of the uncles come running out on the oval just (laughs) with nothing on and we all had to stop play. (laughs) Made us laugh, and one of the aunties had to come and take him off to go and get him dressed, take him back down the bush again and put clothes on him.

And why did that happen?

I don't know why he done it, but he done it. Might have been something to do with – I don't know, what could be done with – was it white race or what? I don't know. Ever since I seen that I seen people now, streaking over the cricket pitch in Australian cricket there.

But the white players had a change room, and the others – – –.

Yes, they had a change room in the shed, the little shed was near the oval, little tin shed, and we had to change from home – come from home dressed up in our football gear. And when we'd finished we'd go back home and change our gear. And the white people got changed in this little shed.

I think that's – it sort of comes through in your work, like it's all quite – your paintings make you smile. Underneath it there is all this sort of sadness about how the community was when you were growing up.

Yeah.

So it's sort of a subtle education, is that what you're trying to do?

Sort of as an education to me.

(laughs) Was it?

Education to everybody else that reads it, too.

Yes. (turns pages) Oh, and 'Swimming before school' in the Murray.

Yes, we used to get up in the morning and, because it would be hot then, go in the river – this is in the River Murray – and have a swim, wash our hair and wash ourselves before we got dressed, and when we got dressed our mother used to cross us over the river then and we'd walk to school, about nearly ten kilometres up the road. And after school we'd walk back and sing out to her, and she'd come across and pick us up and take us back on the other side of the river again. After school.

And where were you living then?

Along the riverbank, near Winkie – yes, not far from Winkie and the Winkie Flats.

So the River Murray was your bathroom, or – – –?

Yes, the River Murray was the bathtub at the time. And the drinking water and the wash water. (laughs) Because, see, the water would be – the river would be flowing all the time, and when you'd have a bath you wouldn't get any soap or anything there because it's gone straight ahead, it would go downriver. Wash your clothes and it would be gone, too.

Oh, that one was 'Being picked up by the Berri police', and your little kids were left. (laughs) What did they do?

We walked out of the hall one night and we're coming over, you know, was going up to the 'phone box to ring a taxi, and I seen the police coming – oh, because someone broke a window. And they rang the police and we were coming across, and police went around and pulled up in front of me, and I said, 'What do you want?' And then they started hassling me. And they put me in there without even asking me what I'm doing. All we were doing is going across to ring up a taxi to come pick us up, and he

just put me in and left three kids standing crying on the side of the footpath. And he left them there and never told anybody. Till my nephew seen them. My niece took them home to her place then, or they would have been stranded out there.

And did the police let you go eventually?

Oh, a couple of hours after. But that would have been all finished if no-one was there to take them home, they would have been stranded out there.

And next one was ‘Watching my auntie and mother cooking fish’.

Yes, they used to cook fish on the river, down by the river near, making damper and putting the fish in the reeds and putting them in the ashes and cook them in the ashes. And then summer we’d go out rabbiting and then bring the rabbits back and eat the rabbits. But I had to sit out and watch auntie and mother making the damper and cooking the fish, because we had fishing lines set out at the same time.

So you’d catch them and they’d cook them.

Yes, I’d catch them and they’d cook them after, or there’d be someone else there catching them at the same time, and then start cooking them before tea-time.

And the last one is ‘Drawing houses in the sand’.

Yes. We were all teenagers living at Loxton North, and we walked about ten kilometres down by where the river is, and then we said, ‘See if we can make our own house,’ so everybody started drawing houses in the sand. And we had a fire going there and we were going getting wood, getting brushes to sweep away the rough sand and the leaves, and take our shoes off and then draw the houses. There’d be bedroom, kitchen, lounge, and then we were all paired up like boyfriends and girlfriends, we’d all sleep in our own house! (laughs)

That’s good. Do you have favourite paintings that you’ve done?

Oh, I’ve had that many I can’t remember. They all seem to be good to me.

They are all good, they’re all wonderful. Well, that’s everything I had to ask you. So did you want to sort of say anything more? Do you think I’ve missed anything I should have talked about or asked you?

No, not really. I think I’ve talked enough. (laughter)

Do you? Okay. Well, thanks very much, Ian.

That's all right.

END OF INTERVIEW.